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On Suffering Fools: A Confession

JAMES STREET

He does not suffer fools lightly.”

Those words rolled off the speaker’s tongue as high praise. He spoke about a brilliant, articulate, incisive colleague reputed for his directness. Indeed, many saw that directness as symptomatic of our colleague’s high intelligence and unwavering commitment to truth.

I could not discount our colleague on any of those charges. Our colleague’s mind certainly operated more quickly than my own. His impeccable logic and careful reasoning often left me sitting speechless. And, to be sure, he did not hesitate to speak his mind. The less carefully constructed arguments of those who set about to debate him lay dead on the field of philosophical and theological battle.

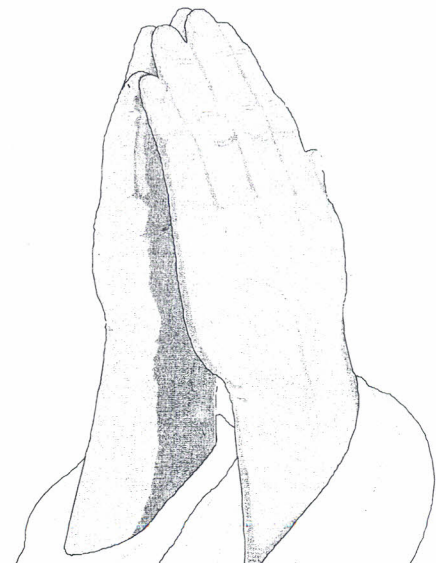
I had no quarrel with the intellectual abilities of our colleague. However, I did wonder about the way the speaker characterized him. Was the practice of “not suffering fools lightly” a Christian virtue?

As I contemplated that question, I asked myself whether I would want to be so characterized. “Indeed, I would!” I thought. I would love to be described as possessing such high intelligence and directness of speech that someone would say of me, “Ah, yes, Jim Street. He certainly does not suffer fools lightly!” I imagined the awe that others would experience in hearing that.

However, as I probed my thinking, I felt ashamed for desiring to be characterized in that way. After all, my fantasies of being brilliant, direct and even intimidating only served to stroke my ego. They compensated for a deeper fear that I was anything but brilliant or direct.

Of course, I had my own philosophical and theological justifications for my lack of directness. I had been trained in the university as a counselor. The non-directive, client-centered approach of Carl Rogers had been drilled into me by one of Rogers’ own colleagues. “Seek first to understand,” I was told. “Create space for others to search for their own solutions,” I was taught. “The client is the expert on his own life.”

My job as a counselor was to create a warm and inviting atmosphere of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and “patient waiting.” If I did my job, the client could slowly surrender her fears and risk gaining insight into her difficulties. Any perceived “foolishness” on the part of the client had to be considered a lack of understanding on my part. “Jane, I feel confused. On the one hand I hear you saying ‘X’ and on the other I hear you saying ‘Y.’ Could you help me clear up *my* confusion?” Thankfully, I would never have to say, “Jane, what you are saying is patently absurd.”



I came to understand God as a “fool-suffering” God. Was God not “long suffering,” patient with the antics of folks like me? Who was I to confront the foolishness of others when God suffered my foolishness all the time? As far as I was concerned, our foolishness could be chalked up to our wounds rather than to our waywardness. We were not so much sinners as “sinned against.” If I could understand that and go on creating space for human foibles then God could too.

As a bonus, I was not without cultural justification for understanding “leniency” as a fundamental virtue of the Christian faith. After all, I was reared in the 1950s South, and we Southerners were committed to freedom, space-making, and civility. Did not our confederate war heroes stand up for the right of each state to pursue *its own* course? And were we not noted for sweet tea, fatback, and good old Southern fried hospitality? And were we not raised to say “how nice” when what we really thought was “drop dead!” As long as everyone stayed in his/her place, God was in *his* heaven and all was right with the world.

Thankfully, my heritage, my education, and my theology supported my God-given gift for suffering fools. Looking back I see that it was all a façade.

I gradually realized that I was not much better at suffering fools than anyone else. Oh, I may have appeared long-suffering and willing to walk the extra ten to twelve miles with the foolish. But inside I was dying.

Counseling others became an agony. While I could maintain a counselor’s countenance of empathy and warmth, I found myself thinking, “How ridiculous.” “Why don’t you just get over it!” “Sister, you made your bed and now you have to lie in it.” “Brother, you lie down with dogs you get up with fleas.” *I said*, “You must feel terribly ashamed.” *I thought*, “Somebody needs to knock a knot on your head.”

At times in the ministry, I felt as if everyone could have feelings but me. “Now, Sister Jones, I know it must be painful to see visitors sitting in your spot, but just look at it as an opportunity to see the world from a different perspective.” “Yes, Brother Jones, I know we don’t baptize that many people, but it won’t hurt to put a little carpet down by the baptismery so the wood floors don’t get wet.” I wanted to say, “Why don’t you folks get a life!” I chose the path of the diplomat.

Sometimes in the ministry diplomacy is a virtue and it only costs you your soul.

But what are we to do? Do we take the direct path and “not suffer fools lightly?” Or do we take the long and winding road “of suffering fools gladly?”

Although my practice has not yet caught up with my insight, I think we would do well to contemplate the image of Jesus portrayed in John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, *full of grace and truth*.”

Jesus was “full of grace and truth.” As I contemplate that phrase, I take the word “and” to be every bit as important as those heavy words “grace” and “truth.” Jesus embodied the razor’s edge between grace *and* truth. The word “and” suggests that there is no grace without truth and no truth without grace.

Most of us tend to favor one side or the other of that razor’s edge. Some of us speak the chain-sawed truth and let the chips fall where they may. Others of us practice a doormat’s grace at the expense of our self-respect and mental health. The grace-givers enable the truth-tellers. And the truth-tellers practice grace only after they have been nailed to the wall by the murderous rage of the grace-givers who have had enough of their truth.

In our dealings with others and ourselves, we do well to walk that razor’s edge with Jesus. Otherwise, we will practice a truth which lacking grace is not truth and a grace which lacking truth is not grace.

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